

HMMWVs:

They're Not Indestructible...Neither Are You

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“We always wear seat belts, except when we are in a tactical training environment,” one NCO stated, following a HMMWV rollover.

In another HMMWV rollover, an SNCO said, “My Marines always obey the speed limit, but it doesn’t really apply when training on a fire-and-movement range.”

Finally, another NCO stated, “I’ve never seen any of my Marines driving recklessly,” following yet another HMMWV rollover.

Many Marines are aware that motor-vehicle mishaps cause most fatalities. This fact holds true both on and off duty. Let’s look at three cases of death, dismemberment and destruction along the trail of rollovers in the past five years.

In the first case, an NCO was returning some mechanics to the motor pool from the field. The driver seemed to believe that General Motors had

built a vehicle that was “unrollable.” As he set out to prove himself correct, he destroyed a HMMWV A2, gave his A-driver an avulsion from his wrist to his elbow, and has to live with brain damage for the rest of his life. He tried to fishtail the vehicle while accelerating down a slope on a dirt road. The speed of the vehicle still is unknown, but, when the driver’s side rear wheel caught a ditch, the vehicle slid sideways and went airborne—for more than 50 feet. As it corkscrewed through the air, both he and his A-driver were ejected. Only the two mechanics in the back seat had had the sense to buckle their seat belts. When the vehicle landed, one mechanic got out, kissed the ground, and went to his comrades to start first aid.

In the second case, a CAAT platoon was conducting a rehearsal for a fire-and-movement exercise on a range. One of the SNCOs was not happy with the slow pace and directed the Marines



In the past five years, several HMMWV rollovers have resulted in numerous deaths, dismemberment, and destruction.



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to pick up their pace. While retrograding from a forward firing position to a rear one, the HMMWV attempted a 110-degree turn into the position. In the turn, the driver lost control, and the vehicle slid. At one point, it was sliding almost broadside down the road. When the vehicle left the road, the tires dug into soft sand and "bit," resulting in a slow roll. It came to rest on its roof, killing the .50-caliber gunner who was in the turret. The driver was exceeding the speed limit for a gravel road. He was relatively new, with limited experience on unimproved roads.

Finally, a corporal of the guard decided to drive the duty HMMWV while making his rounds. This mishap also occurred on a dirt/gravel road. An investigation found he was driving well over the speed limit, he wasn't licensed, and no one in the vehicle had worn seat belts. The HMMWV was destroyed, one Marine was killed, and the rest were injured after being ejected.

These three mishaps have several things in common. The first is that they all prove HMMWVs, in spite of their relatively low center of gravity, can and do roll over.

Second, all of the vehicles were on unimproved roads. Drivers must understand that tires grip sand and gravel about half as well as asphalt or concrete. Marines from the north know what snow does to their brakes, and those of us from the south know what hitting a puddle and hydroplaning is like. Sand and loose gravel are nearly the same.

Directly related to this point is the third factor: speed. All of the drivers were well above both the established speed limit and safe speed of the road or training area. It's clear that, in two of these mishaps, the drivers were hot-dogging, horseplaying, or whatever you want to call it. Tactical vehicles are not your personal recreational vehicles. For Marines at Camp Lejeune or Camp Pendleton, you are limited to 25 mph in training areas. When you train at Twentynine Palms, vehicles are limited to 30 mph, conditions permitting. When a driver exceeds these speed limits, he or she places the occupants, vehicle and careers on the line.

Many Marines are aware that motor-vehicle mishaps cause most fatalities and property damage.

Fourth, seat belts played a part in who walked away and who didn't. If a vehicle rolls and an occupant is not restrained, he or she most likely will be ejected. We had one driver nearly killed, and an occupant walked away unscathed from the same mishap. In the case of HMMWVs with turrets, leaders carefully must plan and brief safety considerations. Drivers absolutely must obey the speed limit and take extra precautions to prevent collisions or rollovers. A gunner in a turret doesn't have a chance when the vehicle lands on top of him.

Finally, two of the drivers in these mishaps were incidental drivers. One was not licensed at all. Leaders must account for lack of experience of their drivers when planning and executing training. 